

#192 JOE MORGAN: FORD ISLAND NAS

Steve Haller (SH): . . . Steven Haller and we're here at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu. It's December 3, 1991. It's about 3:15 p.m. And I'm speaking with Joe H. Morgan. Mr. Morgan was an Aviation Ordnanceman Third Class at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941. His outfit was VJ-2, stationed at Ford Island. Mr. Morgan was nineteen at the time of the attack and presently is sixty-nine years old, and we're glad you could be with us . . .

Joe Morgan (JM): Thank you, I . . .

SH: . . . here today . . .

JM: My pleasure.

SH: . . . very glad you could share your story, which sounds like a very interesting one indeed. Now, how did you get into the Navy, Mr. Morgan? I'd like to start with some of that background.

JM: My two older brothers had joined the Navy before, (mumbles) since I was the kid brother, I decided to -- actually, I dropped out of high school and joined the Navy while I was still eighteen, and ended up going to San Diego Naval training station for my basic training and went to Class A aviation ordnance school following that. And then eventually ended up here in Hawaii, first with Utility Squadron 1 until Utility Squadron 2 had been formed, and I was flank owner of Utility Squadron 2. VJ-1 was stationed in a hangar with the patrol squadrons, on the southeast part of Ford Island. And then when we were forming the VJ-2, we were transferred across the field to what we call Luke Field side of Ford Island, in the southernmost facility, a small hangar at that area.

SH: What were your usual duties?

JM: Primarily my duties were to maintain the armament of an aircraft, that included bomb racks, the bomb sights, the machine gun mounts and the machine guns, and ammunition. And also in the case of the utility squadron, to maintain and operate the towing equipment. Our squadron was basically a target towing squadron and we towed the targets for the fleet to practice shooting at a moving target.

SH: Was this --- did airplanes practice gunnery also? Was that . . .

JM: Oh yes. The entire fleet, the large ships and also ground troops and fighter planes all practiced at moving targets that we would tow along behind our planes.

SH: What kind of planes were in your squadron?

JM: Oh, we had a couple of PBY, the old PBY-1s, which didn't -- they had to land in the water, they didn't have wheels on them. They were not amphibious. And then we had J2Fs, the Grumman Duck, which was an amphibious plane. A bi-wing, single engine amphibious plane. And we used both kinds. Generally the ducks were for towing targets for the ground fire and the PBYs would tow targets for the ships, to shoot at the anti-aircraft batteries at 'em.

SH: Were the ducks the kind of planes, that large, light-built . . .

JM: Yes, that's the kind. Uh-huh.

SH: What kind of routine did you have and was it any different in the days before the attack, or did you feel anything different in the routine, or the air, or the (mumbles)?

JM: Well, our basic routine was first of all, was to police the area, come down and straighten up everything for daily inspection, we would be inspected. And then we would be assigned to either cleaning machine guns, or cleaning of all these pistols that were used on the night watch, the night before. We would clean them every morning when they were brought back in and storing them. We kept a count of ammunition. We had to belt ammunition by hand in those days.

SH: A tedious job, I'm sure.

JM: Huh?

SH: A tedious job, I'm sure.

JM: Yeah, well, yes, it's very slow. It's ten rounds at a time that you've got to operate a hand operating machine. Later on, we got electric machines that, which I operated after we got into the war.

We also had to load the bomb racks. The two months prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, even our towing planes carried live depth bombs under their wings. And because the unidentified submarines had been sighted in the areas, and we were flying on orders to drop a bomb on any unidentified submarines. We did not ever have to do that, but part of the job was that we had to unload those bombs when the plane came in, then the next day before they go out, we had to load 'em back on. It was part of the job. And the bomb racks themselves we had to remove periodically and take 'em in and clean them all up and re-lubricate 'em to keep 'em operating properly. The machine guns had to be cleaned quite frequently because we had been using some thirty- caliber machine guns for area gunnery practice for several weeks prior to the attack of Pearl Harbor. And for that reason, they were out of cosmolean at the time of the attack, and we were able to actually get them in planes within ten minutes after the attack, and we were loaded and firing machine guns.

SH: What did you do the day or the night? Was the day before a regular day for you?

JM: Well, it was a Saturday. I generally went skating or went on liberty, or something like that. Our tennis courts were used as also skating rinks there on Ford Island, and I enjoyed skating and going to movies, and things like that. But the night before, I knew I had watch the next day so I went to bed early and I made the report early at the squadron hangar. Mustered eight o'clock to go with the ongoing duty section. And that's when the Japanese struck, about five minutes before we mustered at eight o'clock. We were just sort of waiting around for the muster to happen and we heard these planes coming and diving, and we thought they were our own planes because there was a carrier supposed to come in that way, and they always sent their planes in

ahead of time to land at Ford Island. And sometimes they were even given permission to do mock raids on the base, and we just assumed that's what was happening, until we had this loud explosion across the field, over in the VP section, where the VP squadron was. And we all rushed out of the hangar to see -- we thought it was a plane crash -- in time to see instead it was a hangar on fire. And about that time, a Japanese plane came diving out of the sun and dropped two bombs and pulled out. And when he pulled out, we could see the rising sun under his wings, and then we knew for the first time that we were actually being attacked by the Japanese Imperial Navy.

SH: Saw two bombs fall?

JM: Two bombs fell from that plane. He was a dive bomber and dropped it right into the area of the VP squadron and of course, that was the worst hit of any place on Ford Island. I'm sure because they wanted to knock out our long range planes so that we couldn't get to their ships.

SH: Right, I'm sure you're right. But what did you do then?

JM: Well, by that time, several planes that had come, started strafing and but one particular one that I noticed was -- plane had evidently had dropped its load over at Marine [*Corps*] Ewa [*Air*] Station. And it was coming alongside the, coming up the channel right near our hangar and it was flying so low I could see the goggles on the rear gunner's helmet, as he swings his machine guns around and starts peppering our area with machine gun fire.

Fortunately, I was right close to a dual wheel tractor that we used to pull our seaplanes out of the water. And I jumped behind that tractor and I was protected from the machine gun fire.

SH: Did it hit the tractor?

JM: I don't know what it hit, but all I could hear is the bullets hitting the metal building behind me, and it sounded like hail storm, you know, with all those bullets hitting the, the metal. And I looked out here, you see puffs of dust rising from the concrete where the bullets were hitting, but I never, I didn't get a scratch.

And, but the problem was, when I was squatting behind that tractor, it dawned on me that just less than a hundred feet away was our high explosive magazine. In my mind, I figured that would be a target, so my fear turned to terror. And I started looking for high timber, went into the hangar and found a big I-beam to get behind. And I hid into that I-beam. I actually squeezed myself into the recesses of that I-beam, with the I-beam between me and the magazine so that if it did go off, I would be fairly protected. But I look up and see these guys had picked up the pistols that we had used on the watch the night before, some forty-five caliber pistols, and went out and started shooting at the planes with these forty-five caliber pistols. Come out, some other guys broke open the emergency rifle cabinet, cabinet, with the 03 rifles, the old Bull (mumbles) rifles. Went out and started shooting at planes with rifles. And here I am, an aviation ordnance man, and I'm hiding in the I-beam.

So I became very much ashamed of myself. I really got so ashamed that I had enough courage then to go into the armory and get some of the other guys to help me load the machine guns and all of the gun mounts of our planes -- we had

about twelve planes sitting out there on one of that. And so we put these thirty caliber machine guns we had been using in gunnery practice and we went out there and put those guns in the mounts of the planes. And the last gun I put in, I got behind it and manned it. It was on the wheel, tied to a PBY-1, a heavy patrol bomber, and I stayed in there and manned that machine gun for the rest of the attack. I killed 'em both ways. Spent the rest of the day there 'cause we expected them to come back. Matter of fact, we even had a rumor that there would be troops landing on the south shores of Oahu. And so we even got ready for that possibility. And during the entire attack, I manned this thirty- caliber machine gun, as they kept bringing ammunition back, guys kept bringing ammunition out to me, as they did to the other guns that were being operated.

The problem was all of our ammunition had been belted up in practice ammunition, which means you have ten live rounds and a dummy round. Ten live rounds, and then a dummy round. And so what they had to do, a gang of the fellows that went in to start pulling the dummy rounds out and putting live rounds before they brought us the belted ammunition.

SH: What would happen when the dummy round got into the chamber?

JM: It would stop the machine gun. It would stop firing every time it hit a dummy round.

SH: Why were the practice ones belted that way?

JM: Well, to keep you from shooting up all your ammunition in one burst. (Chuckles) When you're practicing like that . . .

SH: Sort of to teach you the hard way?

JM: . . . those bullets go very fast. And so it's just, brrrt, like that. That's ten bullets. And if you don't have a dummy in there, you might go ahead and spend fifty rounds before you think to turn loose. So that's to save ammunition.

SH: You mentioned the carrier --- well, but before we get into that, you were on Ford Island, and you were surrounded by ships. Ships are getting hit. Were you able to --- did you notice any of the big explosions, when the *ARIZONA* went up, or the *SHAW*, or did you have a sense of the . . .

JM: Yeah, I saw . . .

SH: . . . the widespread . . .

JM: . . . the *SHAW* . . .

SH: . . . devastation?

JM: . . . blow up. And it's from the exact same angle that these famous pictures are from. And it was just bigger than anything you ever saw on the Fourth of July. And of course, most pictures are black and white, except those that's been tinted by hand, and but I saw it in living color.

SH: What color was it?

JM: About every color in the rainbow. Blue, red and green, purple, yellow and the pyrotechnics shooting out in all directions. I mean, it was just unbelievable. I did not see . . .

SH: Was it loud?

JM: Huh?

SH: Was it loud?

JM: Well, I was quite a ways from it, you know. It was over in the shipyard, and I was on Ford Island. It was just the big explosions. Of course, there were so many other explosions going on, we couldn't disting-- one, distinct one from the other. And I did not see the *ARIZONA* blow up, which is probably at about the same time. But it --- I'm sure the *ARIZONA*, you know, was a bigger explosion, although the *SHAW* was in, on the marine railway, it was out of water. So it would have this wider explosion. The *ARIZONA* explosion was more straight up because of the immensity of the ship.

But one of the things, very memorable, is seeing the first Japanese plane shot down. It was very close to our hangar. It was flying from north to south and all of a sudden it starts to be a cartwheel, and crashes into the water, just about five hundred yards off of where I was situated.

SH: Did it splash?-- how close were you to that? You got a pretty good view?

JM: Oh, I had front row view to that one. And then right after that, a little midget submarine that was sunk that morning, in the harbor, was right out in front of our hangar. I was sitting there watching all this happen, when this little submarine managed to surface, and it looked like he was . . .

SH: You saw the sub?

JM: I saw the submarine and it looked like he was going to be firing torpedoes on the USS *CURTIS*. But the gunners on the *CURTIS* saw him too and started shooting at him and put two five-inch shells right through his conning tower, and that just spoiled his aim and he began to sink. But here comes the USS *MONAGHAN* across him and drops two depth charges on him. But the *MONAGHAN* had to be going so fast to keep from blowing off his own fantail in that shallow water, with his own depth charges that he couldn't make the bend in the channel and run aground.

SH: That's right.

JM: And I don't know how long, probably almost the rest of the attack. He was trying to get off the mud flat. In the meantime, the USS *DALE* comes along and wasn't too far behind the *MONAGHAN*, 'cause they -- I was talking a man off the *DALE* just last week, and he said, "We saw it all from the *DALE*."

And they got on out. First, they were the first of the fighting ships to get out of the harbor.

SH: Did you recognize the planes, the kind of plane? Was it a torpedo bomber that you saw shot down?

JM: I don't know whether it was torpedo. That looked more like a Zero. The one that was -- either that or a dive bomber, one of the two. Torpedo planes are a little bit larger, but this looked more like one of the But I did see another, either a dive bomber or a torpedo bomber, later on that I actually had a part in shooting down.

SH: I wanted to ask you if you feel that you hit any . . .

JM: I don't know how many I hit, because I was shooting at everything that I could get my sights on. And I was --- there were so many of 'em you couldn't watch, you shoot at the guy, and he gets out of sight and you shoot somebody else. But there is this one fellow, he looked like he had dropped his torpedo or his bomb over around where the *CALIFORNIA* was, or where that big movable crane was. But anyway, he was flying across the runway, and we saw him coming, and by then, there was all the guns in my squadron started shooting at him, including yours truly. And we just peppered bullets in him and he burst into flames and trailing along a trail of smoke and fire. And we thought sure he was going to crash out in the water right off of our hangar, but instead he sort of does a little arching dive and dove it right into the crane deck of the *USS CURTIS*. And that was classed as the first kamikaze of World War II. And matter of fact, there is a plaque over on Ford Island designating it as such.

SH: So you kept firing at . . .

JM: We just kept . . .

SH: . . . planes that attacked . . .

JM: Yeah. They were --- I didn't even know there were two waves until somebody told about it later on. It was me --- it was how --- it was just one continuous attack. And I just wasn't even aware of the time at all, until about one o'clock in the afternoon, somebody come around with some sandwiches and I said, "What time is it?"

They said, "One o'clock."

And I wasn't even hungry. I had so much kind of emotion, you know.

SH: Yeah.

JM: In fact, it was sort of like being in a dream. You know it's happening, but you're not sure if it's real, the whole thing, like that. And yet the fear was real and the anger, and the hatred, the animosity was real, or that developed as it, as the attack went on. The anger at the pilots, the anger at not being given warning ahead of time. And then it moved into a hatred for the nation of Japan and some part, I didn't have any hatred for the local Japanese and fortunately, there was none of them ever, not a single one ever proved to be disloyal to America.

And that went into an animosity where I wanted or enjoyed hurting the enemy. And then, I went through a state which I learned about later, after Vietnam, I did some post-graduate studies in dealing with military discharges and the problems they had. But there was for men and women who grew up in a Judeo-Christian society, have to go through this psychological state before

they can feel comfortable about shooting another people, and that's called the dehumanization of the enemy. And I had that experience. I began to really think about the Japanese as being less than human, so I was comfortable toward shooting at them.

SH: Killing them, yeah.

JM: And this anger, hatred, animosity stayed with me practically throughout the war and it was fifteen years later that I finally dealt with it. But there was one other emotion I had that morning, that's stronger than all of the rest, and that was the realization that I was out of god's will. You see, ever since I was four years old, I had indication that god wanted me to be a preacher. You know, like Jonah in the bible had joined the Navy instead. Fortunately, like Jonah that got down on his knees in the belly of that big fish, and said, "Oh god, get me out of this mess and I'll preach for you."

Well that night, I got down on my knees in the belly of that PBV, and said, "Oh please god, if you get me through this war alive, I'll preach for you."

He really took me seriously because just three months later, I was transferred to the island of Maui, and I spent the rest of the war there. Did not see any more activity, hostile action at all. But yet my squadron was transferred on down to the South Pacific.

But another thing happened at that point, I'd like to share it with you.

SH: Please.

JM: I had been dating a local girl for several months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Well, around the end of November, first part of December we decided we'd better quit seeing each other, because after all, I was engaged to a girl back in Texas. And she was engaged to a local fellow, and we thought, well, we weren't being truth to our fiancées, so we decided not to see each other.

Well, the attack on Pearl Harbor came and so I, as soon as I could use the phone, and that was a week or two later, before we were even allowed to use the phone. We couldn't even write a letter to our folks back home. We had to sign a particular kind of card that sent a message back to our families in the mainland. She couldn't even call me to find out what happened. But finally when I got a hold of the phone, I got a hold of her and told her that I had survived and asked her if we could go to lunch. And so she approved, so we got together and discovered that we really meant more to each other than we had realized, formerly. And so we decided to go back to seeing each other on a regular basis. And we broke off our relationship with our fiancées, and three months to the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, we got married. And she and I have been together nearly for fifty years. We'll be celebrating our golden wedding anniversary next March, March the seventh.

SH: That's great. That's probably one of the best things to come out of Pearl Harbor.

JM: We'd probably would not have gotten married had it not been for the attack, 'cause I wouldn't have bothered her any more. But it was just out of

concern, I knew she was concerned whether I had made it through. But what's so, what's so beautiful about it, and I believe that the lord's hand was in it, the very next day after we got married, that's when I got orders to Maui.

And then, while we were on Maui, the Southern Baptist missionaries started a little Baptist church in Kahului and we started going to that little church. And I had a chance to make a public commitment of entering the ministry. It was sort of like signing your name in when you go into the Navy, being sort of mustered in me. That to me was the final commitment that I had made on December the seventh.

So after the war was over, I went and finished my college, my high school education, then my college seminary degree. And I was called right back to the island of Maui, to Wailuku Baptist Church, to be pastor to Wailuku Baptist Church. And while I was there, Mitsuo Fuchida, Captain Fuchida, the man who led the attack on Pearl Harbor, came to Maui. Now, here I am, a Christian minister, discovered I still got some of these feelings I had from World War II, this anger, hatred and animosity. Here, this man, who had in the meantime, become a Christian. And he's coming to share his testimony. And I still --- how am I going to deal with these feelings towards this man who, fifteen years ago, tried to kill me?

I decided to go ahead. And while he was giving his talk, god changed my heart and took away these feelings of anger, hatred and animosity towards this man and toward his nation. The point he gave me the grace to forgive my enemy and to meet this man no longer as an enemy, but as a Christian brother.

After his talk, I went up and introduced myself to him as a survivor of Pearl Harbor. He did that little polite Japanese bow, and said, "Gomenassai. Forgive me."

We shook hands and I got a picture of us, him and I, shaking hands. Not as enemies, not even as former enemies, but as brothers in Christ. I believe that that is the real answer, forgiveness and becoming brothers together will bring peace to this earth.

SH: That's some story.

JM: Thank you. Thank you.

SH: What's the most vivid -- and you describe a lot of vivid stories -- but what, when you think back on that day, what's the most vivid memory that comes to mind?

JM: Well, it's hard because it was so full of high emotions, as far as to pinpoint the one thing. Probably from the physiological aspect, it was seeing that plane we shot down and yet in his struggle of life, he dove it into that ship.

SH: The *CURTIS*?

JM: The *CURTIS*. And of course, emotionally, the commitment I made to enter the ministry if I lived through the war was the most memorable.

SH: Since you were on Ford Island, do you, were you able to witness the tragic arrival of the flight of the scouting bombers from the *ENTERPRISE*? Did you see any of that?

JM: I'm sorry to say that I had a part in shooting a lot of those down..

SH: I'm sorry.

JM: Matter of fact, one tried to land right during the attack. And we were told that if any plane in the end with his landing gear down, he was Japanese. And here come this plane, coming right close to Ford (coughs) where we were situated, and his wheels was down, and I thought he was coming in to strafe. I did not hit him. At least I didn't give him a mortal hit. I did put some tracers through his wings when he pulled out. Somebody yelled, "He's our plane," when he pulled up, we could see the star under his wing.

But it's hard to distinguish, because you see, there's a round ball, at that time, and our American stars. But that night, when they came in and we shot down all this five or six planes, no plane could fly through the scrap that went up that night. If they --- the sky was just full of tracer bullets, and tracer bullets is generally the every tenth bullet, and the sky was full of tracers. You know there were a lot of bullets going up there. And we shot down, I think, five of our own planes there. And like I said, I had a part in it. I don't know whether I hit him actually, but I was sure shooting that night. Only I had a fifty-caliber machine gun by then, because they had come out that afternoon and traded my thirty-caliber for a fifty caliber.

SH: Well, thanks for sharing your story with us, Mr. Morgan. It was really very interesting and more than interesting, it was very moving listening to you.

JM: Thank you.

SH: Thank you.

JM: I hope that, honestly hope that this fiftieth anniversary will be a time of reconciliation and forgiveness, on the part of both sides.

SH: I hope so too.

JM: Amen.

END OF INTERVIEW